

# A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



CRAIG BIRHLE

*Adult wild turkey and young*

## From Poults to Adults

Snood, wattle and caruncle is not the name of a law firm, but rather the unique neck and head parts of a bird introduced in North Dakota more than a half-century ago.

Like ring-necked pheasants, Hungarian partridge and chinook salmon, wild turkeys are not native to North Dakota, yet can now be found from the badlands to the Red River Valley.

Today, hunters can pursue turkeys in both spring and fall, which always hasn't been the case. The first spring turkey season wasn't held until 1976, nearly 20 years after the first fall turkey season.

Wild turkeys are polygamous, meaning strutting and gobbling males will attempt to mate in spring with as many as five or six females. After mating, the hen builds a nest on the ground usually near the strutting ground and water, and lays two eggs every three days until she has a clutch of 10-13.

Dry, warm weather in June during peak hatch is important for chick survival. Spring rains are also vital as it encourages growth of vegetative cover and associated protein-rich insects eaten by young.

Turkey young, or poults, are initially covered in brownish fuzz. After about two weeks, their wings have developed enough to carry them into tall trees and roost with adults. After about six weeks, young turkeys are good fliers.

To determine turkey populations, broods are reported incidentally during summer roadside brood counts for pheasants and other upland game birds. Landowners are also quizzed about the number of turkeys they had hanging around their property during the winter prior.

Turkeys are gregarious birds and travel about in flocks. The only time during the year when these flocks are broken is during the stretch in spring when the hens secret themselves away to nest.

By the time the fall hunting season rolls around in North Dakota, young are fully grown and are mostly indistinguishable from older birds, save for shorter beards – long, black feathers growing from the chest – on younger males.

Adult turkeys have keen eyesight, hearing and can cover ground quickly on long, powerful legs. And when they decide to fly, it's been said that some birds can top out at 55 miles per hour, which must really send the wind whistling through the snoods, wattles and caruncles.

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